EVIL LORDS

Evil Lords

THEORIES AND REPRESENTATIONS OF TYRANNY FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE RENAISSANCE

Edited by

Nikos Panou and Hester Schadee

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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CIP data is on file at the Library of Congress
ISBN 978–0–19–939485–2

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

Contents

Acknowledgments vii
Contributors ix

Introduction: Tyranny and Bad Rule in the Premodern West 1
Hester Schadee and Nikos Panou

1. The Discourse of Tyranny and the Greek Roots of the Bad King 11
Nino Luraghi

2. 'A King Like the Other Nations': The Foreignness of Tyranny in the Hebrew Bible 27
Jennie Grillo

3. Discourse of Kingship in Late Republican Invective 43
Yelena Baraz

4. Imperial Madness in Ancient Rome 61
Aloys Winterling

5. Contradictory Stereotypes: 'Barbarian' and 'Roman' Rulers and the Shaping of Merovingian Kingship 81
Helmut Reimitz

6. *Tyrannos basileus*: Imperial Legitimacy and Usurpation in Early Byzantium 99
John Haldon and Nikos Panou

7. Evil Lords and the Devil: Tyrants and Tyranny in Carolingian Texts 119
Sumi Shimahara

8. There Are No 'Bad Kings': Tyrannical Characters and Evil Counselors in Medieval Political Thought 137
Cary J. Nederman

9. A Crooked Mirror for Princes: Vernacular Reflections on Wenceslas IV 'the Idle' 157
Pavlína Rychterová

10. 'I Don't Know Who You Call Tyrants': Debating Evil Lords in Quattrocento Humanism 172
Hester Schadee

11. Machiavelli's *Prince* and the Concept of Tyranny 191
Gabriele Pedullà

BIBLIOGRAPHY 211

INDEX 237

Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK HAS been long in the making, and many debts have been incurred along the way. It was conceived in the wake of the conference 'Bad Kings' organized at Princeton University in March 2010 by Nino Luraghi, to whom we are most grateful for allowing us to run with his ideas. We organized the 'Second Day of the Bad King' in March 2011, with the specific aim of completing the lineup of the volume, and it is our pleasure to thank the speakers, respondents, and audiences of both conferences for generating the debate that is reflected in this book. Nonetheless, a number of substitutions were required, which pushed back the deadline more than once: we therefore take this opportunity to thank our earliest contributors for their patience, and those who joined us later for the timely delivery of their texts. We are grateful to all for the expertise and interdisciplinary scope that they brought to this project. The volume was developed during our fellowships at Princeton's Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts, and subsequently at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität and the University of Exeter, and at Brown University and Stony Brook University, respectively: the support of all five institutions is gratefully acknowledged.

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EVIL LORDS

Introduction

TYRANNY AND BAD RULE IN THE PREMODERN WEST

Hester Schadee and Nikos Panou

'TYRANNY IS THE normal pattern of human government'—so stated Adlai Stevenson, the eloquent politician and diplomat who twice ran for US president.[1] This pithy phrase was not intended as an indictment of human nature or of the corrupting effects of power, but rather as a tribute to the intelligence of constitutional mechanisms that divide and circumscribe political authority. Without these checks and balances to prevent or minimize abuse of power, government, Stevenson implied, ipso facto equals tyranny. From this perspective, the political history of the premodern West is essentially a history of tyranny, until a legal-political technology—constitutionalism—provided the means to create an alternative. Leo Strauss, on the other hand, called tyranny 'a danger coeval with political life'.[2] While agreeing on the ubiquity of bad rule, this observation suggests that tyranny is not a historical phase in political evolution but rather a condition that asserts itself at different times and in a variety of circumstances. In Strauss's view, there is therefore no long-term systemic solution to tyranny; instead, it is an ever-present danger, lurking under the surface of ostensibly well-organized states.

If the political catastrophes of the twentieth century spurred considerations of tyranny in modern states, evil lords—or at least flawed rulers—have demonstrably

[1] Adlai Stevenson II, cited in F. Oakley, *Kingship: The Politics of Enchantment*, Oxford, 2006, p. 4.

[2] L. Strauss, *On Tyranny*, eds V. Gourevitch and M. S. Roth, corr. and exp. edn, Chicago, 2013, p. 22.

exercised the minds of men since the advent of written literature. The epic hero Gilgamesh, to name but one, was a source of fear and violence before he transformed into a good king. Two different types of problematic rulers are introduced in the *Iliad*, as the narrative inexorably unfolds from a clash between autocratic arrogance and heroic intransigence. Subsequent poets, historians, philosophers, theologians, orators, satirists, and educators of all sorts have addressed the topic of bad rule as much as, if not more than, that of good government. Much of this literature is didactic or hortatory in nature, seeking to counter or mitigate bad rule through education. Some of it examines the evil lord as a device through which his positive counterpart may be defined. Many texts are diagnostic, in that they offer scripts for recognizing and dealing with tyrannical administration. Some may even be apotropaic. But what all these writings have in common is a concern with how political societies should be administrated, and with the ways in which reality can or does fall short of these ideals.

The present volume uses the prism of tyranny or bad rule—the distinctions and overlap of both terms will be discussed below—to generate a better understanding of political discourse from the ancient world to the Renaissance. This topic has received less scholarly attention than theories of the good ruler or the ideal state, particularly in a cross-chronological framework.[3] Yet, paraphrasing Tolstoy, one could claim that good lords are all alike, whereas bad ones tend to be bad in their own particular ways: that is to say, their misdeeds—and the manners of their evaluation—may be more tellingly specific than those of their better halves. For instance, bad or tyrannical governance, as Strauss and Stevenson suggest, may be attributed to human or systemic causes, identified pragmatically or in legal terms, and conceived

[3] The most recent contributions on premodern monarchical ideals include *Le savoir du prince. Du Moyen Âge aux Lumières*, ed. R. Halévi, Paris, 2002; *Le prince au miroir de la littérature politique de l'Antiquité aux Lumières*, eds F. Lachaud and L. Scordia, Mont-Saint-Aignan, 2007; *Concepts of Kingship in Antiquity: Proceedings of the European Science Foundation Exploratory Workshop Held in Padova, November 28th–December 1st, 2007*, eds G. Lanfranchi and R. Rollinger, Padua, 2010; *Le roi fontaine de justice. Pouvoir justicier et pouvoir royal au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance*, eds S. Menegaldo and B. Ribémont, Paris, 2012; and *Every Inch a King: Comparative Studies on Kings and Kingship in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, eds L. Mitchell and C. Melville, Leiden/Boston, 2013. On tyranny (sometimes including 'bad rule'), see primarily R. Boesche, *Theories of Tyranny, from Plato to Arendt*, University Park, PA, 1996; Mario Turchetti, *Tyrannie et tyrannicide de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, 2nd edn, Paris, 2013; *Confronting Tyranny: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics*, eds T. Koivukoski and D. E. Tabachnick, Lanham, MD, 2005; *Tiranía: Aproximaciones a una figura del poder*, eds G. Cappelli and A. Gómez Ramos, Madrid, 2008; *Le tyran et sa postérité dans la littérature latine de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance*, eds L. Boulègue, H. Casanova-Robin, and C. Lévy, Paris, 2013; and W. R. Newell, *Tyranny: A New Interpretation*, Cambridge/New York, 2013. Finally, two volumes with a double focus are *Le philosophe, le roi, le tyran. Études sur les figures royale et tyrannique dans la pensée politique grecque et sa postérité*, eds S. Gastaldi and J.-F. Pradeau, Sankt Augustin, 2009; and *The Splendors and Miseries of Ruling Alone: Encounters with Monarchy from Archaic Greece to the Hellenistic Mediterranean*, ed. N. Luraghi, Stuttgart, 2013.

of as covert control or open political violence. Furthermore, the types of crimes that constitute it can be seen as committed against the individual, society, or the cosmic order at large. And while its pernicious effects have been routinely execrated, tyrannical rule has on occasion also been justified as political necessity or even providential punishment. Precisely because of these many variables, we believe that there is value in a comparative study of the longue durée. But first a word on terminology is in order.

Naturally, the vocabulary used in discussions of bad rule—which in this volume span more than two thousand years and range from the Near East to England—has varied with time and place. Most important, 'tyranny' did not always exist as a category; when it did, it was frequently identical with bad governance, but sometimes an aggravated version thereof, while in other systems there could be 'tyranny' without bad governance. Similar issues pertain to the definition of the 'tyrant'. Likewise, political theorists often use the word 'prince' to include any single ruler, yet in certain contexts a 'prince' must be distinguished from, say, a 'king', while in others a single ruler can be a 'tyrant' precisely because he is not also a 'prince'. The essays in this volume discuss the legal or conceptual force of the relevant vocabularies in their specific historical contexts. Yet these differences should not obscure the fact that the discursive value of terms such as 'tyrant', 'bad king', 'evil lord', and so on is often the same. It is, indeed, this continuity—though blurred and imperfect—that makes a comparative study worthwhile, as it provides the foil against which the other variables gain relief. Starting from these premises, the book is intended to advance our knowledge on three levels.

First, the individual chapters present a collection of case studies that illuminate ancient, medieval, and Renaissance conceptions and representations of bad or tyrannical rule. Some contributors (Haldon and Panou, Rychterová, Schadee, Shimahara) analyze textual materials hitherto understudied or hard to access in English. Others (Baraz, Grillo, Luraghi, Nederman, Pedullà, Reimitz, Winterling) approach well-known sources with new perspectives or hermeneutic strategies. A common pursuit of all authors is to identify the particularities of the historical moments they examine, while also relating these to broader themes.

Second, and following from this, the study of bad rule opens a window onto at least two sets of factors influencing politics and political thought. Theoretically speaking, it is an exploration of the idea of 'badness', an anti-value that elucidates and, as noted, sometimes generates, the complementary 'good values'.[4] Since bad

[4] See, in this respect, *Kakos: Badness and Anti-value in Classical Antiquity*, eds I. Sluiter and R. M. Rosen, Leiden/Boston, 2008.

rule is always a perversion of the norm, changes in its conceptualization demonstrate the shifting notions of what constitutes legitimate or acceptable human, social, and political behavior. The discourse of bad rule must therefore be seen in its relationship to ethical and metaphysical principles that contributed to the understanding of politics, as well as to broad concepts such as state and individual, liberty and happiness, human and divine justice. In practical terms, exploration of this discourse also brings to the fore the constituent elements and aspirations of actual political exchange: its authors and audiences, its means, and, especially, its ends. These factors are themselves culturally specific, and so embed the analysis in socio-political as well as intellectual history. Thus, by tracing conceptions of bad rule in eleven case studies, we uncover the ideological structures and societal patterns of the cultures in which they took shape.

Third, the chronological and geographical span of the volume creates a narrative of the 'western tradition' pertaining to bad rule from its ancient roots to its radical revision at the brink of modernity. The book addresses Hebrew and Greco-Roman foundations, transformations in the postclassical West and in Byzantium, vernacular translations, and finally revival and then rejection of the ancient heritage over the course of the Renaissance. These spatial and temporal frameworks are chosen because of their inherent cohesion, which will become apparent to the reader, but is not thereby self-explanatory. The scope of the volume therefore demands articulation both of the features of a 'Western tradition' on tyranny—or, indeed, of a category meaningfully called 'the West'—and of the periodization 'premodern'.

Our area of interest in this book is defined not so much by a shared political destiny or cultural identity as by the dynamic exchange of ideas. Indeed, while conceptions of bad rule derive from shared roots, the vitality of the tradition results precisely from the different political and intellectual contexts in which these seeds branched out, bore fruit and cross-fertilized. Underlying this interdependent plurality, we believe two contradictory motives driving the discourse of tyranny can be discerned. On the one hand, there is a long-standing and fundamental unease with monarchs, generated by their arbitrary, unchecked, and as it were extrainstitutional power. From this point of view, all monarchs are bad rulers. This perspective arises, independently, in the Hebrew Bible and in Greek and Roman thought, with the Greek perception also influencing the later Hellenizing sections of the Old Testament. After antiquity, its fortunes declined, but its influence never disappeared completely. On the other hand, there was an almost constant imperative—practical as well as intellectual—to accommodate monarchical supremacy. The concept of sacral monarchy, an ancient Near Eastern model also preserved in the Hebrew Bible, and furthermore expounded in Hellenistic philosophy of monarchy, played an important role in this respect, providing both Catholic and Orthodox Christianity with

their typical dualistic frameworks.[5] In this construction, the earthly sovereign ruled by divine right and was the mirror, as well as the minister, of the heavenly lord: a mediator between human beings and the supreme and eternal king of the cosmos. In this providential harmony, the existence of anything but good rulers needed to be explained. Consequently, bad kings—undeniably common occurrences—were reinterpreted as either a punishment from God, or led astray by bad counselors, or not kings at all but tyrants, and thus deprived of legitimacy and divine support. Indeed, it is in this guise of tyrant that one recognizes the longevity of the bad king of the anti-monarchical tradition, who regained his independent existence with the Italian Renaissance.

Diametrically opposed though these perspectives are, a connective thread of both the pro- and the anti-monarchical tradition lies in the criteria employed for assessing bad rule. By and large, these derive from virtue ethics in their Greek, Roman, and Christian incarnations.[6] In virtue ethics, the source of moral behavior, as well as the basis for moral judgment, is the character of the individual—in other words, the sum of intrinsic traits, or settled dispositions, that define his or her personal identity and social interactions.[7] From the very start, Western virtue ethics and political philosophy were intimately intertwined. Aristotle's foundational *Nicomachean Ethics* develops the theory of virtue strictly within the parameters of civic life, since virtuous character—and, therefore, happiness—can only be achieved by citizens within the context of the city state. His equally seminal *Politics* treats virtue as a criterion for distinguishing good and bad regimes, and for determining both the optimal constitution and the distribution of political offices in the city.[8] The elevation of princely virtue as a requirement for the happiness and welfare of the political community at large reflects the Hellenistic advocacy of monarchy within this

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[5] See J. Hani, *Sacred Royalty: From the Pharaoh to the Most Christian King*, transl. G. Polit, London, 2011; and *La royauté sacrée dans le monde chrétien*, eds A. Boureau and C. S. Ingerflom, Paris, 1992. For the early modern theory of divine-right kingship, rooted in medieval ideas on the divine provenance and sacred aura of royal authority, see J. N. Figgis classic *The Divine Rights of Kings*, 2nd edn, Cambridge, 1914; and, more recently, M.-F. Renoux-Zagamé, *Du droit de dieu au droit de l'homme*, Paris, 2003, esp. pp. 246–316.

[6] Cf. R. Balot, *Greek Political Thought*, Malden, MA, 2008, p. 12: 'There is ample scope to speak of "virtue politics" in the ancient world, by analogy with the virtue ethics for which ancient philosophy has become well known. The virtues and vices therefore played a larger and more consistent role . . . than they could in modern political discourse.' See also, in this respect, J. R. Fears, 'The Cult of Virtues and Roman Imperial Ideology', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II.17.2, 1981, pp. 827–948; and *Princely Virtues in the Middle Ages, 1200–1500*, eds I. P. Becjzy and C. J. Nederman, Turnhout, 2007.

[7] For a survey of premodern and modern theories of virtue ethics, see, most recently, *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. D. Russell, Cambridge/New York, 2013.

[8] See A. MacIntyre's discussion of Aristotle's account of the virtues in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edn, Notre Dame, 2007, pp. 146–64; and W. R. Newell, 'Superlative Virtue: The Problem of Monarchy in Aristotle's *Politics*', *Western Political Quarterly*, 40:1, 1987, pp. 159–78.

general Aristotelian framework.[9] Consequently, from antiquity to the Renaissance, the legitimacy and effectiveness of monarchical rule were viewed as in large measure dependent on the moral rectitude of the ruler—a quality that, moreover, was seen as instrumental in securing the love, respect, and loyalty of his subjects. Conversely, the sovereign's failure to cement his life and governance on the exercise of virtue and eradication of vice could only result in conduct antithetical to the common good, and consequently in compromised legitimacy.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, other paradigms of political theory—reason of state as well as a new absolutism—while by no means constituting a complete break with the past, nonetheless complicated or rejected reliance on virtue as the foundational principle of government.[10] In brief, the former current of thought—traditionally associated with Machiavelli—excused certain vices as pragmatically necessary for governance. The latter allowed the argument—archetypically advanced by Thomas Hobbes—that virtue and vices alike were superseded by the greater good of unchallengeable sovereignty. From both perspectives, the demise of the Aristotelian understanding of political morality marks the end of the bad ruler as a personally flawed, indeed evil, lord. We have taken this shift—in terms of political philosophy, at least—to be the boundary between premodern and modern; it thereby also marks the terminus of the volume at hand.

The starting point for an enterprise of this sort is inevitably the ancient Greek world, where both the discourse of tyranny and Western political thought as a discipline originate. The volume therefore begins with Nino Luraghi's systematic discussion of the essential attributes of the tyrant in ancient Greece, whence both the term and the concept spread throughout the West. Seen against the background of Greek cultural and moral values, the tyrant emerges as a radically marginal character, a violator of the accepted norms of sociability, a monstrous aberration. Thus, tyranny

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[9] See, for instance, T. Adam, *Clementia Principis. Der Einfluss hellenistischer Fürstenspiegel auf den Versuch einer rechtlichen Fundierung des Principats durch Seneca*, Stuttgart, 1970. For an overview of the theory and practice of Hellenistic monarchy, see F. W. Walbank, 'Monarchies and Monarchic Ideas', in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 7:1: *The Hellenistic World*, eds idem, A. E. Astin, M. W. Frederiksen, and R. M. Ogilvie, 2nd edn, Cambridge/New York, 1984, pp. 62–100.

[10] For reason of state, see M. Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State: The Acquisition and Transformation of the Language of Politics, 1250–1600*, Cambridge/New York, 1992; R. Tuck, *Philosophy and Government, 1572–1651*, Cambridge/New York, 1993; and *Raison et déraison d'État. Théoriciens et théories de la raison d'État aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles*, ed. Y.-C. Zarka, Paris, 1994. On early modern absolutism, see *Absolutism in Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. J. Miller, New York, 1990; but cf. the revisionist approaches in N. Henshall, *The Myth of Absolutism: Change and Continuity in Early Modern European Monarchy*, London, 1992; *Der Absolutismus—ein Mythos? Strukturwandel monarchischer Herrschaft in West- und Mitteleuropa (ca. 1550-1700)*, eds R. G. Asch and H. Duchhardt, Cologne, 1996; and in *Absolutismus, ein unersetzliches Forschungskonzept? Eine deutsch-französische Bilanz / L'absolutisme, un concept irremplaçable? Une mise au point franco-allemande*, ed. L. Schilling, Munich, 2008.

was perceived and depicted not as a bad political alternative but as a primordial sort of evil: a taboo that cannot be rationalized. Yet, the discourse of tyranny, Luraghi argues, underpinned the whole concept of monarchy in Greek culture, to the point that the typical virtues of the ideal ruler were nothing more than a reversal of the negative traits of the tyrant.

From Greek thought, we move to a second foundational corpus, as Jennie Grillo explores the—not unrelated—question of what it means to be a bad king in the Hebrew Bible. Her answer focuses on a particular type of marginality, to wit foreignness in various forms. Exotic otherness is shown to have served as a basic negative trait already in the central strata of the biblical corpus, while originally Greek conceptions of oriental despotism influenced the depiction of bad kingship in post-exilic texts. By contrast, in textual layers of a still later date, all earthly kingship is dismissed as evil: as Grillo observes, a long history of disappointment with bad Jewish kings led to the biblical proclamation of Yahweh as the only lord fit to rule over Israel.

Yelena Baraz then examines the anti-monarchical discourse that was indigenous to Rome since the expulsion of the kings. Through a study of the lexicographic range of the words *rex* (king) and *regnum* (kingship), she parses the accusations of 'regal aspirations' abounding in political writings of the late Republic. Although associated with the last Roman king, the 'tyrannical' Tarquin, these terms were not indicative of constitutional positions. Rather, in the rhetoric of faction politics, they suggest the traits of arrogance and rampant ambition. Thus refining our understanding of political discourse in the final years of the Republic, Baraz also paves the way for a new understanding of Julius Caesar's dictatorship and its critical assessment before and after his assassination.

This same inherited stigma of kingship, as well as the legacy of noble faction, form the backdrop to Aloys Winterling's chapter, which reinterprets the archetypical 'tyrannical emperors' Caligula, Nero, and Domitian. Winterling falsifies the psychological approach of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century scholarship and instead analyzes the emperors in the context of, on the one hand, the paradoxical sociopolitical conditions of early imperial Rome and, on the other, Rome's traditional aristocratic ideals. In Winterling's treatment, supposed insanity becomes a strategy for unmasking (Caligula), superseding (Nero), or breaking down (Domitian) the contradictions inherent in the imperial *res publica*. Provocatively, his reconstruction suggests that it is the traditional 'good emperors' who are in need of explication.

Entering the postclassical world, Helmut Reimitz examines what happened when Roman power structures were inhabited by so-called barbarian, 'do-nothing' kings. Focusing in particular on the multilayered depiction of Chilperic I (c. 539–589) in the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours, Reimitz shows that the Merovingian kings are

rebuked not only for barbarous and un-Christian behaviors but also, surprisingly, for being 'too Roman'. These critiques, he argues, originate with local political and ecclesiastical elites, who feared a destabilizing displacement of their own authority and jurisdiction as the Merovingians strove to centralize their state after the model of Rome. Once again, therefore, foreignness of various kinds becomes the marker of a bad king, this time reflecting the interplay between the complex sociopolitical developments of the sixth century and the Roman imperial tradition.

The following chapter shifts the focus to the Eastern empire, examining the evolution of perceptions of tyranny in Byzantium from the late Roman period to the eighth century. John Haldon and Nikos Panou show that these constitute the inverse of crucial concepts in Byzantine imperial ideology, particularly with regard to issues of religious orthodoxy, moral integrity, military efficiency, and administrative competence. Furthermore, they argue that the nature and scope of these perceptions can be better understood when examined in conjunction with the discourse of tyrannicide and usurpation as deployed in a broad spectrum of historical, hagiographic, and propagandistic works. The discussions commonly surrounding cases of legally precarious coups d'état offer insights into when, how, and why political actors came to be considered as tyrants in the first centuries of the Byzantine millennium.

Perceptions of tyranny are again the subject of Sumi Shimahara's chapter, as she discusses the ways in which terms deriving from the root *tyran-* were employed in biblical commentaries and other sources of the Carolingian era. Shimahara shows that eighth- and ninth-century authors developed a distinct discourse on tyranny by blending pagan and patristic views with their own ethical-political principles. Carolingian conceptions of tyranny were grounded in considerations pertaining both to legality and to morality, with vice, eschatological concerns, and the association with the devil playing as important a role as issues of illegitimacy, usurpation, or malfeasance. These conceptions were moreover fairly elastic, as related terms not only had a wide connotative range but were also used to describe a variety of abusive behaviors of a royal, secular, or ecclesiastical origin.

Cary Nederman complements this with a study of the conceptual impossibility of the 'bad king' in the medieval Latin West—a conundrum that caused evil lords to be defined exclusively as tyrants. Nonetheless, political theorists from Isidore of Seville to John of Salisbury, Thomas Aquinas, and Dante display a remarkable ambivalence toward the tyrant's role in civic life. While condemned in normative political theory, tyranny was often viewed as acceptable when a populace was deemed incapable of benefiting from good government, or—as Haldon and Panou show regarding Byzantium—it was legitimized as an instrument of divine punishment. Nederman demonstrates furthermore that even overtly tyrannical behavior could be

countenanced by attributing it not to the prince himself but to his evil counselors, who were subjected to much scrutiny in high and late medieval mirrors for princes.

The later Middle Ages saw a growing importance of the vernacular languages: their role in shaping the form, content, and audiences of late medieval political thought is the subject of Pavlína Rychterová's inquiry. Focusing on a famously wicked king of the late Middle Ages, Wenceslas IV (1361–1419), she traces the origins of his bad reputation to a group of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century writings, which are often dismissed as fictions or studied solely as literature, but in fact represent new modes of articulating good and bad kingship. Rychterová shows that, in the context of an increasingly literate bourgeois culture, especially in university cities, these vernacular works transformed Latin theological approaches to monarchy, while rendering mirrors for princes and related literatures accessible to an unprecedented audience.

The following chapter returns to Latin discourse, as Hester Schadee seeks to define what fifteenth-century humanist treatments of tyranny have in common, and what distinguishes them from their classical and medieval counterparts. To this end, she confronts the numerous (self-)contradictions in the works of Poggio Bracciolini, educated in republican Florence, and Giovanni Pontano, employed in Naples by the royal dynasty. While their arguments range from the rejection of all rulers as tyrants to the education of the ideal prince, both authors depend on the same philosophical frameworks (Aristotle and the Stoa) and rhetorical form (epideictic oratory). Typical for the Quattrocento, these texts make no claim to universal validity, and Schadee argues that they should be read with due recognition of the conventions of literary genre, and humanism's culture of debate.

The volume concludes with an examination of Machiavelli as a theorist who enacted a willful and radical break with the past, yet endorsed most of his predecessors' tenets. Starting from Machiavelli's provocative omission of the term 'tyrant'—in favor of the euphemism 'new prince'—and his reassessment of 'tyrannical' behaviors as princely prudence, Gabriele Pedullà shows how these maneuvers earned the Florentine the execration of generations of commentators. They, however, misread him. Rather than denying the existence of pragmatically and morally evil lords, Pedullà argues, Machiavelli redraws the boundary between them and good rulers. Instrumental in this is the concept of glory, which reveals itself only in the fullness of time. In the present, Machiavelli implies, it is therefore impossible to distinguish with certainty a good prince from a tyrant.

These eleven chapters amply demonstrate that the execution of power was a constant source of anxiety from antiquity to the Renaissance. This is perhaps inevitable, since power is synonymous with inequality—be it in wealth, force, status, or other resources—and therefore carries with it the risk of oppression and the threat of violence. Evil lords were those rulers who capitalized on these differentials

to the detriment of their inferiors, or who obtained their advantages against the dispositions of an even greater power—whether law, ancestral custom, or divine will. Because of the enormity of these transgressions, evil lords were often marginal while being powerful: marked out as foreign, monstrous, irrational, or even devilish, they were in one or more ways inhuman. At the same time, they were part of the human condition, both in everyday experience—because power and its corruptions are ubiquitous—and in the structural sense of defining the ideals and limitations of the body politic.

Consequently, particular instantiations of evil lords illuminate their respective societies' ideologies and actual power structures—or, not uncommonly, the tension between these factors. This interplay determines, for instance, whether an evil lord is designated 'king' or cannot be a king, and whether tyrannical behavior marks an aristocrat in a monarchy or a barbarian in the post-Roman world. Additionally, the manifold sources that engage with evil lords—which vary in purpose, authorship, and audience—are testament to the different cultural elites who partook in and shaped political debate. Such elites were not always identical with those who held power, yet their discourse could serve to co-opt or even control—or at least to master and intellectually—the might of others. From the vantage point of history, it is of course they who are responsible for creating and codifying evil lords. Through their writings, then, a story of evil lords unfolds that is universal as well as extremely variegated: we hope that the following chapters provide the reader with rich and stimulating insights on both scores.

11

Machiavelli's *Prince* and the Concept of Tyranny

Gabriele Pedullà[*]

AMONG THE MOST innovative aspects of Machiavelli's treatise *The Prince* compared with fifteenth-century mirrors for princes are certain absences. It is always somewhat dangerous to interpret silences and voids, but in this case Machiavelli's consistent and systematic choice leaves little doubt as to his intentions. Among the elements banned from Machiavelli's text are all those dedicated to a humanistic education, from a guide to proper manners at the table, in dress, and in conversation (the 'minor ethic' later called 'etiquette'), to the articulated *cursus studiorum* that authors such as Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Francesco Filelfo, Bartolomeo Platina, Francesco Patrizi, and Filippo Beroaldo the Elder taught their pupils, destined one day to shoulder the responsibilities of government. Anyone even vaguely familiar with these works would immediately have recognized Machiavelli's desire to break with this tradition once and for all. Machiavelli is not interested in molding a humanistic prince, and he wants this to be clear to his readers from the beginning. As he writes in Chapter XIV:

> A prince, therefore, must not have any other object nor any other thought, nor must he adopt anything as his art but war, its institutions, and its discipline; because that is the only art befitting one who commands. . . . On the other hand,

[*] This chapter was translated from Italian by Stephen Marth and revised by the author.

> it is evident that when princes have given more thought to delicate refinements than to military concerns, they have lost their state.[1]

This choice has an impact on the entire structure of his treatise, beginning with its length. The conciseness of *The Prince* in comparison to the majority of fifteenth-century treatises of the same title is in part a result of Machiavelli's decision to do away with the elaborate pedagogical dictates of the humanists.

Machiavelli's first readers, however, would have noted yet another absence, one that would perhaps have been even more disconcerting to them: the absence of the figure of the tyrant. Whereas in the history of political theory—from classical to medieval and humanistic theory—the tyrant occupied a central place as a negative image of the good ruler, Machiavelli's treatise does not employ the term at all. A lacuna of this sort would not have gone unnoticed. Prince and tyrant—type and antitype—were present as an inseparable pair in every work on the theme available to Machiavelli's contemporaries, including those by Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, Isocrates, Cicero, Seneca, Dio Chrysostom, and Pliny as well as more recent authors. The juxtaposition of the two figures, prince and tyrant, was crucial for defining the characteristics of the prince, almost as if the true nature of the former could only emerge through comparison with the latter.[2] Rather than political, or indeed before being political, the divide was of a moral nature. Not only was the tyrant devoid of the virtues required of a good ruler, and afflicted with all the opposite vices, but he represented a precise human character: the image of the extreme state of degradation at which an individual might arrive who was incapable of controlling his animal impulses and submitting his senses to reason. In his worst incarnation, the tyrant represented a sick person, to be pitied more than hated.

In the *de principe* genre, instructions and prohibitions are often listed side by side, as are vices (to be avoided) and virtues (to be cultivated), according to a presentation that Machiavelli himself reproduces in Chapter XV. Nevertheless, this contrast could be summarized for the most part in one principal distinction: while a tyrant looks after his own self-interest, a prince truly deserving of this title dedicates himself entirely to the well-being of the whole community. This clear distinction, on which everyone agreed, was more difficult to maintain when judging concrete political actions. The question was particularly complicated in Italy, where since the end of the thirteenth century, but at an accelerated rate in the following century, a large number of municipalities in the center-north of the peninsula had fallen prey

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[1] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, transl. P. Bondanella, Oxford/New York, 2005, p. 50.

[2] See especially the chapters by Nino Luraghi and Jennie Grillo in this volume.

to the power of one family or another. Benefiting from the fighting between several factions, the most unscrupulous clans were able to take control of the municipal government and, little by little, through force and cunning, lay the foundations for dynastic lordships. From the perspective of their adversaries, they were clearly tyrants, but the rulers rejected this accusation, preferring to present themselves as peacemakers and 'protectors' of communal liberties.

Of course, the dispute was not just a matter of names. Authors from antiquity, beginning with Cicero (*De officiis*, III.4.19, and *Philippicae*, II.44.114 and II.46.117), invited citizens to openly rebel against those who usurped public power; in the language of scholastic and legal philosophy, they were urged to exercise the 'right of resistance', physically eliminating the tyrant if necessary. The only divergence that emerged on this point was whether the citizens were required first to appeal to higher authorities who might then punish the guilty ruler, or whether they could take up arms themselves. Yet, although there was absolute consensus about the principle that tyrants incarnated corrupt and evil politics, the difficulty lay in recognizing them. Was there an indisputable system for identifying a tyrant? The question was further complicated by the frequency—still at the beginning of the sixteenth century—with which the term was employed to delegitimize political opponents, whether they be feudatories who had usurped the prerogatives of central power, or lords unwilling to recognize certain privileges traditionally afforded the community. 'Tyrant' could also be applied to a citizen who had obtained too much power (even without attacking the republican forms of self-government of his city) or to a prince who levied a particularly burdensome tax on his subjects. Therefore, in the language of the period, the term could refer to vastly different figures and behaviors.[3]

Such 'abuses' only made attempts to verify the existence of truly despotic authorities that much more difficult. In response to this question, Machiavelli's contemporaries continued to repeat the solution proposed a century and a half earlier by one of the greatest medieval jurists, Bartolus of Sassoferrato, in his brief treatise *De tyranno*.[4] With the approach of a man of the law who turns to philosophy to develop those indispensable conceptual instruments necessary for interpreting the actual examples in question, Bartolus formulated two concrete and effective principles to distinguish legitimate lords from those who instead warranted the title tyrant.

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[3] See the chapters by Cary J. Nederman and Hester Schadee in this volume. Note also the parallel use of *rex* in republican Rome discussed by Yelena Baraz.

[4] D. Quaglioni, *Politica e diritto nel Trecento italiano. Il 'De tyranno' di Bartolo di Sassoferrato (1314–1357)*, Florence, 1983.

Bartolus had read in Thomas Aquinas that there were two instances in which authority (*praelatio*) can be defined as 'not coming from God': 'first, as to the mode in which authority is acquired, and, second, as to the use which is made of authority' (*Commentarium in sententias Petri Lombardi*, II.44.2.2). Starting from this dyad, he constructed his system for identifying and condemning a tyrant. The case of unworthiness to rule stemming from its acquisition was clearly the more straightforward of the two. Whoever holds a position of governance, Bartolus explained, must be able to provide formal recognition of his condition of preeminence by a superior power (the *praelatio* of which Thomas Aquinas had spoken); otherwise he is a 'tyrant for lack of title' (*tyrannus ex defectu tituli*). In Italy, with the exception of the free independent municipalities, this left only two possibilities. A lord could exercise power thanks to the authorization of the emperor in those parts of the peninsula that belonged to the so-called *Regnum ltaliae* (the entire center-north, Tuscany included, with the sole exception of Venice). Alternatively, he could obtain a papal license within the Papal States (in the South, in the kingdom of Naples, formally a territory subordinate to the pope but in practice independent, the problem of territorial fragmentation into small autonomous enclaves was not as pressing). For Bartolus, in the absence of a legal *titulus*, anyone who imposed himself as the ruling lord of a free city or who had, through force, usurped power to which he was not entitled, was to be unquestionably considered a tyrant and punished for his illicit appropriation.

More complex to identify were what Bartolus referred to as *tyranni ex parte exercitii*, that is, the tyrants whose tyranny resided in their actions. Abstractly speaking, their evident lack of concern for the common good (*bonum commune*) would have sufficed to unmask them. Bartolus, however, being the adept jurist that he was, knew that the effectiveness of his categories was proportional to their precision and as such labored to offer the reader as detailed a record of cases as possible. As Jérémie Barthas has recently demonstrated, the importance of Bartolus in the history of political thought lies in the invention of a special semiotics of power meant to separate good from bad rulers.[5] It is with this aim that *De tyranno* looks for support to Aristotle (*Politics*, V.11) and Giles of Rome (*De regimine principum*, III.2.10), both of whom had cataloged the instruments (*cautelae*) that tyrants commonly employ to reinforce their control over a city. Following their example, Bartolus identified ten actions that were despotic enough in nature to reveal and inculpate a tyrant: killing the most eminent citizens; eliminating scholars (here Bartolus was thinking primarily about

[5] J. Barthas, 'Formes de gouvernement ou modalités de la preuve? Éclaircissements sur le *Traité du tyran* de Bartole de Sassoferrato', in *Della tirannia. Machiavelli con Bartolo*, ed. idem, Florence, 2007, pp. 47–73.

jurists); discouraging or oppressing scholarship; prohibiting legitimate associations; filling the city with spies; dividing the citizens; impoverishing the people; engaging the city in useless wars to distract the citizens from other concerns; enrolling foreign mercenary soldiers to guarantee the safety of the ruler himself; adhering to a faction and persecuting the opposing faction. Even when in possession of a legitimate title, recourse to any of these strategies without just cause (*iusta causa*) was evidence enough that the government in power was corrupt, instantly allowing the subjects to appeal to the superior authority who had conferred the title on the tyrant in order to have him deposed.

Bartolus' theory immediately enjoyed great success and would continue to influence all reflection on good and bad government in Europe, through to at least the eighteenth century. At times, some legitimate doubts remained about the status of tyrants *ex parte exercitii* due to the exceptions provided by just cause (e.g., the homicide of Remus by Romolus), which made unmasking them more difficult. For example, how could one show that a war had been initiated merely to distract the citizens from internal political events? Or demonstrate a ruler's intent to keep a city divided? Until otherwise proven, a ruler could claim that all attempts to bring about peace among factions had simply failed. Though he did admit that some cases were inevitably unresolvable, Bartolus ultimately believed that the wicked conscience of a guilty tyrant could not escape the notice of a capable jurist, who would always find a way to expose it. Generally speaking, Bartolus' concept was the most remarkable system for incriminating tyrants to be devised by a man of the law, and as such remained a mandatory point of reference for Machiavelli's contemporaries in their attempt to limit the power of princes—big and small, lay and ecclesiastical—and oblige them to give greater attention to the needs of their subjects.

The bewilderment of Machiavelli's first readers at not finding any allusion to the tyrant in *The Prince* should be explained within this context, in which this word did not merely refer generically to a selfish or violent ruler but rather carried a technical value (as was true for the humanist mirrors for princes as well).[6] Machiavelli not only avoids using the term 'tyrant' to describe some of the most famous Greek despots commonly identified as such in ancient sources but even seems to want to conceal the illegality of all those lords who were not formally recognized by an authority

[6] See G. Cappelli, 'La otra cara del poder. Virtud y legitimitad en el humanismo politico', in *Tiranía: Aproximaciones a una figura del poder*, eds idem and A. Gómez Ramos, Madrid, 2008, pp. 97–120; and G. Pedullà, 'Scipione e i tiranni', in *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, eds S. Luzzatto and G. Pedullà, vol. 1, ed. A. De Vincentiis), Turin, 2010, pp. 348–55.

with the blatant euphemism 'new prince' (*principe nuovo*).[7] In Machiavelli, this expression sounds like a direct provocation. After all, what were the majority of 'new princes' discussed in his treatise if not obvious tyrants *ex defectu tituli*, in other words, those who had always been the easiest to condemn using Bartolus' system? By never uttering the term—the single word capable of inciting censure, and hopefully punishment—Machiavelli appears to have wanted to help despots suppress the evidence of their illegitimate usurpation of power.

Machiavelli's acceptance of behaviors traditionally associated with corrupt rulers—parsimony bordering on avarice (*The Prince*, XVI), the refusal to exercise clemency (XVII), the employment of deception (XVIII)—must have been met with more disapproval still. But it gets worse. While Machiavelli only endorses one of the *cautelae tyrannicae* listed by Bartolus, namely, the suppression of eminent figures who threaten the 'new prince', his advice to princes to inspire fear rather than love in his subjects could easily have caused readers to envision uncontrolled outbursts of emergency measures against all opponents (XVII). The absence of the term *tyrannus* for figures like Hiero, Agathocles, and Nabis, together with Machiavelli's euphemistic use of an expression like 'new prince', made it plausible to interpret such positions as part of a larger attempt to shield even the worst rulers from the legal instruments of the jurists.

The absence of the term tyrant, then, is particularly important when one considers that for almost three centuries the reception of Machiavelli's work hinged on this point. His obstinate refusal to use the word throughout the entire work must have been shocking, particularly in relation to princes who were explicitly condemned as tyrants, such as Agathocles and Oliverotto. It would have required so little of Machiavelli—just one word—considering that Artistotle's use of the term in the *Politics* offered readers such a clear indication of his judgment. The fact that Machiavelli prefers the generic term 'prince' to describe both good and bad rulers transmitted instead the idea that, all things considered, he suggested to good rulers that it was possible to adopt the techniques of the bloodiest despots without losing their status of 'prince'.

It would not be an exaggeration to define some of the first hostile reactions to *The Prince* as 'hysterical'. Teacher of tyrants, the devil incarnate, enemy of mankind: his detractors spared Machiavelli no epithet. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to reduce this anti-Machiavellianism to a kind of caricature reaction as is commonly

[7] It must be noted that 'new prince' was a symptomatic euphemism but not a neologism: in Latin the expression *novus princeps* was used by Roman historians to define new emperors, and above all Vespasian, who gained power without having any blood ties to the Julio-Claudian dynasty. It also appears in the Vulgate and occasionally in the records of the Florentine Republic.

done by modern scholars. The tone of the attacks aimed at *The Prince*, often direct and explicit, should not fool us into underestimating the intellectual seriousness of Machiavelli's detractors. So, instead of dismissing objections to *The Prince*, it is important to remember that, in addition to the insults of the pedants and the devout, there were many fair criticisms of Machiavelli: philosophically argued objections that were anything but laughable—arguments that deserve to be considered seriously if we truly want to understand the significance of the debate.

This is particularly true in relation to the question of tyranny and the absence of the term 'tyrant' in *The Prince*. Indeed, the majority of philosophical attacks on Machiavelli have centered on this point. The origin of these readings can be traced back to a treatise by a famous Aristotelian thinker, Agostino Nifo, whose *De regnandi peritia* (*On the Expertise of Ruling*, published in 1523, even before the first printed edition of Machiavelli's book) was a scholarly rebuttal of *The Prince*. Nifo's work has also been the object of one of the greatest misunderstandings in the history of scholarship on Machiavelli. Despite the fact that Nifo overturns almost all of Machiavelli's conclusions, *De regnandi peritia* is generally (and erroneously) considered a plagiary of the very work it aims to rebut, owing to Nifo's loyalty to the structure of *The Prince* and the great number of long citations of Machiavelli. I will not here go into a lengthy explanation of how this misunderstanding came about.[8] Rather, I would like to stress that, of the many criticisms he levels at Machiavelli, Nifo concentrates above all on the disappearance of the photographic negative of the good ruler. This image he immediately revives by providing a list of the actions that traditional political theory had assigned to the type and antitype: virtuous behavior in the case of princes, and morally reprehensible behavior in the case of tyrants. It is a small amendment, but one capable of instantly rectifying the scandal caused by Machiavelli.[9]

Although *De regnandi peritia* does not seem to have widely circulated or to have been very influential, it is important as the first critique to express an attitude that would become extremely common among Machiavelli's adversaries (independently of Nifo, but based on a shared patrimony of philosophical and legal sources), easily overcoming the religious chasm dividing Europe into Catholics and Lutherans. A small anthology of some authoritative commentaries will show how the accusation raised against *The Prince* is always the same.

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[8] On Nifo as founder of anti-Machiavellianism rather than as a plagiarist, see G. Pedullà, 'Disputare con il *Principe*', in *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, vol. 1, pp. 796–803; and idem, 'Aristoteles contra Machiavelli: Agostino Nifos Traktat *De regnandi peritia* und die Erstrezeption des *Principe* im Königreich Neapel', in *Texturen der Macht. 500 Jahre 'Il Principe'*, eds J. Frömmer and A. Oster, Berlin, 2014, pp. 155–94.

[9] G. Procacci, *Machiavelli nella cultura europea dell'età moderna*, Rome/Bari, 1995, pp. 63–71.

Innocent Gentillet:

> Bartolus, (who was a renowned doctor in the civile law) in his treatise written of tyrannie, wades no thing so deepe in the matter as Machiavell doth, although reading the treatise of Bartolus, it seemes that Machiavell hath learned a great deale of his knowledge: but Machiavell applieth it contrary, seeking, that men should hold it for good, whereas Bartolus speaketh of it as of a damnable thing, which men ought to repulse and shun with all their power: and to conferre a little thereupon, I will here summarily recite certaine points of doctor Bartolus, touching this matter of tyrannie, to shew that which Machiavell hath stolne, yet would applie it to the dutie of a prince, whereas Bartolus attributeth it to the iniquitie and mallice of a tyrant.[10]

Giovanni Botero:

> Machiavelli has created a prince that is nothing more than the tyrant that Aristotle described in his *Politics*, with one or two modern examples in his description. He embraces all that which satisfies the cupidity, the interests, and the appetite of the princes, with no regard for justice or honesty.[11]

René Descartes:

> I think that what the author has missed most is that he has not drawn enough of a distinction between princes who have acquired a state by just means, and those who have usurped power by illegitimate means, and that he has given to *all in general* the precepts that are proposed *only* to these latter ones.[12]

Hermann Conring:

> Machiavelli gives little secret advice to princes for conserving their rule and tyranny that Aristotle had not already taught in the fifth book of his *Politics*. It is almost as if the astute scholar of wickedness transcribed Aristotle and concealed his plagiary. The difference being, however, that Machiavelli advises *all*

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[10] Innocent Gentillet, *Anti-Machiavel*, Geneva, 1576; translated as *A Discourse Vpon the Meanes of Wel Governing and Maintaining in Good Peace, a Kingdome, or Other Principalitie*, transl. S. Patericke, London, 1602, p. 142.

[11] Giovanni Botero, *Dell'officio del cardinale*, Rome, 1599, p. 63. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

[12] Cf. *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, ed. and transl. L. Shapiro, Chicago, 2007, p. 141 (Letter of 15 September 1646). Italics are mine.

princes, while, more justly, Aristotle had explained that this behavior was appropriate *only* to tyrants.[13]

The interpretation advanced by Nifo, Gentillet, Botero, Descartes, and Conring is obviously unacceptable: *The Prince* is not a preemptive justification of despotism, and Machiavelli is not a champion of tyranny. And yet their fundamental concern is entirely legitimate and requires a response. Why does Machiavelli never speak of tyrants? Any reading of *The Prince* must pose this question, directly confronting the bad fame that followed this work for centuries.

Trying to answer the same question, Leo Strauss suggested that Machiavelli's treatise simply demonstrates how it is inappropriate to use the tyrant in a book dedicated to a prince: in the face of political power every wise man will cynically avoid calling it by its appropriate name if he wants to reach his goal. But Strauss's interpretation is unpersuasive for the simple reason that, on the contrary, the very juxtaposition of the two types, prince and tyrant, was a consolidated topos of the 'mirrors for princes' genre from Giles of Rome (*De regimine principum*, II.2.6) and Francesco Patrizi (*De regno*, II.1) up through Erasmus and beyond.[14] In fact, nothing was more reassuring for a prince than hearing that he was not a tyrant, so that in these works the presence of the antitype had a clear eulogizing function.

The solution is evidently more complicated than an anti-Machiavellian like Strauss could admit. Coming at the question from a distance, we could begin by noting that for Machiavelli tyranny is one of many cases in which the word does not correspond to the things it designates. His entire life the ex-secretary of Florence would repeat: 'for it is power that easily acquires a name, not a name power' (*Disc.* I.34). This skepticism toward words as words alone surely informed his judgment in relation to the formulas of feudal legitimacy that were so dear to the jurists of his time. This idea was not without precedent. In a passage dear to humanists as well, Seneca had maintained that behavior was more important than a title and that a tyrant was distinguishable from a king by his actions, not by the title he held.[15] And, of course, it was precisely because there were legitimate princes who perversely abused their power that Bartolus constructed his probative system, in order to denounce to the pope or the emperor those who erred in the exercise of their role. The way in which Machiavelli insists on the irrelevance of titles, however, is completely

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[13] Hermann Conring, 'Introductio in Politica Aristotelis', in *Aristotelis Politicorum libri superstites*, Helmstedt 1656, p. 583. Italics are mine.

[14] L. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago, 1958, p. 26. G. Giorgini comments on Strauss in 'The Place of the Tyrant in Machiavelli's Political Thought and the Literary Genre of *The Prince*', *History of Political Thought*, 29:2, 2008, pp. 230–56.

[15] Cf. *De clementia*, III.10: 'tyrannus a rege factis distat, non nomine'.

different. Seneca speaks in this way to warn the addressee of his mirror, a young Nero, that public ceremonies and birthright alone do not make a man king, and that words like 'Caesar', 'Augustus', or 'Emperor' might conceal a criminal, whose actions are not deserving of the honors and magnificent epithets attributed him by the courtiers. Machiavelli, on the other hand, goes in the opposite direction, demonstrating how some presumed tyrants *ex defectu tituli* or even *ex parte exercitii* offer an example worthy of the utmost attention of his dedicatee, Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici.

The least contentious case is certainly Hiero, in part because here the tension between words and deeds is already there in the ancient sources. As Machiavelli writes, citing Justin: 'He had so much virtue while still a private citizen that someone who wrote about him said: *quod nihil illi deerat ad regnandum praeter regnum* [that he lacked nothing to reign but a kingdom].'[16] However, something similar could be said of other figures mentioned in *The Prince*, like Nabis, or above all Cesare Borgia, who, according to Bartolus' system, would have been quite easily recognized as tyrants *ex parte exerctitii* given some of the actions they had committed to consolidate their power (in particular their use of deceit to preemptively suppress adversaries). By promoting them as examples useful for Lorenzo (who with the election of his uncle as Pope Leo X had found himself in a position very similar to that of Valentino Borgia's in relation to his father, Pope Alexander VI), Machiavelli could be accused of having tried to steer the young Medici prince toward the path of despotism. In fact, according to the account of the English cardinal Reginald Pole, in the 1530s many of the Florentine readers of the *The Prince* were republicans, persuaded that Machiavelli had only tried to convince the nephew of the pope to become a tyrant because he had read in Aristotle that tyranny was the most weak and unstable form of government, thus thinking that this could be the fastest way to have the city liberated from the Medici.[17]

It is undeniable that in *The Prince* Machiavelli praises some rulers famous for their tyrannical actions. And so it is easy to understand the bewilderment of his first readers upon being forced to reconsider everything they believed about good and bad government. Where Machiavelli's adversaries err is in interpreting the meaning and range of *The Prince*'s criticism of the treatises preceding it. The two problems are obviously closely connected, but the second one—the range of the criticism—provides the best starting point for our discussion. Anti-Machiavellians accuse *The Prince* of being an indiscriminate defense of despotism, and sometimes

[16] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 23. According to Livy's account (*Ab urbe condita*, XXIV.4), the aging Hiero left instructions to restore the republican system in Syracuse after his death.

[17] Reginald Pole, 'Apologia ad Carolum V Caesarem', in *Epistolarum Reginaldi Poli S.R.E. Cardinalis et aliorum ad ipsum*, ed. A. M. Quirini, vol. 1, Brescia, 1744, pp. 66–171.

even contemporary scholarship reiterates the idea that Machiavelli did nothing more than attribute to all politicians the traits (and the *cautelae*) that Aristotle had assigned to tyrants.[18] However, Machiavelli's desire to revisit past verdicts, and to open an enormous appeals trial, does not mean that he makes no distinction and considers all rulers equal, nor does he propose amnesty for political criminals whose lack of scruple permitted them to prevail over their enemies.

Chapter VIII is decisive in this regard. Although the term 'tyrant' is never pronounced, Machiavelli—speaking of Oliverotto of Fermo and Agathocles—introduces a distinction between 'virtuous' and 'wicked' princes. The distinction is even more important when we consider that 'virtuous' (Chapter VII) and 'wicked' princes (Chapter VIII) resemble one another more than any other subgroup we encounter in *The Prince*, being the only ones to have gained power with their 'own forces'. The singularity alone of Chapter VIII within the overall structure of *The Prince* should encourage us to examine it more closely. While the other four types of 'new princes' (fortunate princes, virtuous princes, civic princes, ecclesiastic princes) are defined through the role that virtue and fortune played in their conquest of power, here a new criterion for distinguishing rulers is introduced, one that is strictly moral in nature. The reason for this shift seems clear: having re-evaluated two much-discussed figures like Hiero and Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli hurries to introduce two other rulers who greatly resemble the first pair, but fall under the category of 'wicked', and do not deserve to be included among the virtuous like Hiero, nor the fortunate like Borgia (who built his own autonomous dominion upon the pope's power)—because Machiavelli wants to make it clear that not all evil power can be justified in politics.

Writing at the height of the postmodern linguistic turn, Victoria Kahn maintained that Chapter VIII was meant to reassure the reader, following the shocking theses of Chapters VI and VII.[19] Yet, more than a strategy aimed at mitigating the impact of his previous chapters, as Kahn believes, this is Machiavelli's attempt to ensure that he is not misunderstood. Anticipating what would be the standard criticism of *The Prince* for the following two centuries, he clarifies in Chapter VIII that his endorsement of Hiero, Nabis, and Cesare Borgia as models is not meant to be a negation of the distinction between good and bad rulers. The boundary simply lies in a different place from where Bartolus and the other jurists had indicated that it was.

The reception of *The Prince* in the following years demonstrates that Machiavelli was right in worrying about this point, but not explicit enough in his clarification.

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[18] This is A. Burd's argument in his commentary to *The Prince*, Oxford, 1891, p. 289. The same idea can be found in, among others, R. Black, *Machiavelli*, London, 2013, pp. 99–101.

[19] V. Kahn, '*Virtù* and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli's *Prince*', *Representations*, 13, 1986, pp. 63–83 (repr. in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, eds A. R. Ascoli and V. Kahn, Ithaca, 1993, pp. 195–217).

It also shows that the scandal of seeing Hiero, Nabis, and Valentino among the positive models of governance must have disturbed his readers to the point of altering their reception of the rest of the work. And yet, Machiavelli is not reticent about this issue in *The Prince*. On the contrary, precisely in those cases where misinterpretation is the greatest risk, that is, with Agathocles and Oliverotto, he leaves no room for uncertainty. After describing the 'wicked' ways in which Agathocles crushed the republican institutions of his city, Machiavelli writes of the tyrant of Syracuse:

> Still, it cannot be called virtue to kill one's fellow citizens, to betray allies, to be without faith, without pity, without religion; by these means one can acquire empire, but not glory. . . . One cannot, therefore, attribute either to Fortune or to virtue what he accomplished without either one or the other.[20]

His rejection of Agathocles as an example seems undeniable, and yet it still torments readers today. Recently, in a series of important essays that foreshadow a more complete future investigation of the theme, John McCormick attempts to readdress the issue of the Greek tyrants in *The Prince* by demonstrating how, throughout the work, Machiavelli writes admiringly not only of Hiero and (less explicitly so) of Nabis but also of Agathocles, of whom Machiavelli occasionally speaks with warm tones of admiration, above all for his military prowess.[21] Claude Lefort, too, whose reading of this passage was very similar, underscored how many of the actions that condemn Agathocles—to 'kill one's fellow citizens, to betray allies, to be without faith, without pity, without religion'—were offered to Lorenzo as an example to follow in other passages of *The Prince*. The only factors, then, that would have kept Agathocles from obtaining glory were his obscure origins and the dishonorable habit of prostitution that he had adopted as a young man in order to support himself.[22]

On close examination, everything hinges on the significance that we give to one simple little word: 'glory' (*gloria*). If, with the moderns and Nietzsche, we think that it is, at most, a noble illusion not so different from the buyable praise that always accompanies the ascent of the victorious, then Lefort and McCormick might be right. But if we believe, like the humanists and the ancients did, that Glory is something concrete, capable of cheating time and death—something very different from the acclamation of one's contemporaries because Glory comes only when partisan passions die out, and Truth, who is the daughter of Time, finally makes her voice

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[20] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 31 (slightly modified).

[21] See J. P. McCormick, 'Machiavelli's Greek Tyrant as Republican Reformer', in *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy and Language*, eds F. del Lucchese, F. Frosini, and V. Morfino, Leiden/Boston, 2015, pp. 337–48.

[22] C. Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, transl. M. B. Smith, Evanston, IL, 2012, pp. 133–9.

heard—then there is no way we can keep Agathocles as a positive model. In the first case, 'glory' is at most the icing on the cake of the 'empire' (*imperio*); in the second, the 'empire' (i.e., mere success) is just a necessary pedestal without which the statues of great men cannot stand.

Based on what we know about Machiavelli's contemporaries and what he tells us in *The Prince*, where 'glory' is constantly indicated as the main goal of all of Lorenzo's efforts (in line with the most traditional humanistic pedagogy), we have to opt for the second solution.[23] Machiavelli's strategy becomes clearer when we keep in mind that *The Prince* was addressed to Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici in an attempt to persuade him to take exceptional measures against the Florentine aristocracy, swinging from an alliance with the political elite to the people. To do so, Machiavelli must first convince Lorenzo that certain actions traditionally associated with tyrants are indispensable to 'new princes', and that resorting to them does not make one a despot. The examples of Agathocles and Oliverotto become so important because, through a close comparison with (the evidently similar) Hiero and Valentino, *The Prince* comes to demonstrate the enormous difference between the former and the latter, even if both have committed acts that, according to the jurists, would be enough to publicly qualify them both as manifest tyrants. In other words, to present Hiero and Valentino as models, it is necessary to harshly condemn Agathocles and Oliverotto, even if the recourse to violence and treason was common to the four of them.

Machiavelli's argument is an extraordinary mix of old and new ideas. The distinction between mere 'empire' and 'glory' that he uses to condemn Agathocles is in many ways similar to the traditional distinction between the personal interest that is the only aim of tyrants and the tutelage of the collective well-being that is the objective of princes. The line of distinction still exists: it has just shifted to include the new princes who, despite lacking a legitimate *titulus*, demonstrate their actions to be in the interest of their citizens, as well as the new princes who establish their governments through 'severities properly used', that is, severities 'turned to the advantage of the subjects' (a euphemism that refers for the most part to the preventative suppression of enemies who could conspire against the new power).

The true shift revolves around the categories established by Bartolus. One of the strengths of Bartolus' theory was its limited flexibility: the affirmation that a determined action—regardless of who commits it, when they commit it, or where they commit it—automatically defines a ruler as a tyrant has the advantage of providing jurists (and also citizens) with an extremely powerful means of keeping princes from committing certain actions (even with its allowance for cases of just cause).

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[23] For a useful index of the various uses of this term in Machiavelli's work, see V. A. Santi, *La 'Gloria' nel pensiero di Machiavelli*, Ravenna, 1979.

However, the same mechanicalness that assured the efficacy of the process was also its weakness. And it is here that Machiavelli distances himself from the tradition of *De tyranno*.

Cesare Borgia serves as an important example in *The Prince* precisely because—despite his violent actions, treachery, and notorious immorality—Machiavelli is forced to recognize the clear success of his politics and, above all, the enormous benefit that the people of Romagna gained from the elimination of the local lords. Considered individually, Duke Valentino's actions would have made him a model tyrant, deserving of his infamy; and yet, considering them in their entirety, an unbiased observer would be forced to recognize that, from the start, Borgia had distinguished himself from simple tyrants through his dedication to the primary duty of any prince: assuring the common good.

Bartolus would have had no doubts about how to define a man who had committed the wrongs of Cesare Borgia, nor would have any jurist at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Machiavelli on the contrary wants to instill in his readers the idea that things are not so simple. According to Renaissance law, the four figures presented in Chapters VI, VII, and VIII of *The Prince*—the Greek Agathocles and Hiero, both from Syracuse, and the two lords from Romagna, Oliverotto of Fermo and Cesare Borgia—all belonged to the same execrable lineage. But is it right to lump them together in the same family? Or would it not be more accurate to conclude that, all things considered, the Agathocles-Oliverotto type has little in common with the Hiero-Valentino type?

We already know Machiavelli's answer. However, making this distinction, as *The Prince* does, means calling into question Bartolus' entire project. Machiavelli's reasoning is clear: if special political needs force men to commit certain actions, which when examined separately may appear questionable (and they often are), the significance of these actions can only be fully understood once they are judged within a more comprehensive context. This, however, means depriving Bartolus' decalogue of its principal strength; that is, its rigidity.

It is this appeal of Machiavelli's, to judge actions within their larger context, that would cause nineteenth-century readers to attribute to him the expression 'the ends justify the means'—a phrase that the Florentine himself never actually wrote, and which, up until the French Revolution, was polemically attributed to the order of the Jesuits (*finis sanctificat media* or also *cum finis est licitus, etiam media sunt licita*, as they said). Actually, in *The Prince*, more than justifying the means, the ends give us a comprehensive picture of the kind of ruler we are dealing with. That is to say, it makes us understand the difference between a vulgar tyrant, like Agathocles and Oliverotto, and a prince forced to use 'strong medicine', like Hiero and Valentino.

There are many similarities between Machiavelli's response to the Roman revolts in the *Discourses* and his approach to tyrants in *The Prince*. In each case he must confront a humanistic tradition that condemned both without making any distinction between different historical experiences. Machiavelli's first move in the two treatises is to demonstrate that under these words—'tumult' and 'tyrant'—lie many diverging phenomena that make it impossible to judge them as a single concept. In the case of tumults, Machiavelli, basing his arguments on ancient sources, is careful to make a clear distinction between the social conflicts (all positive) that accompanied the growth of Rome, and the bloody struggles that started in the first century BCE (more or less from the Gracchi on), when the old nonviolent 'modes' ceded ground to military conflicts on the battlefield between ambitious generals. By inventing the juxtaposition between the type Hiero-Valentino and the type Agathocles-Oliverotto, he does something similar with tyrants in *The Prince*. Thus, it is not surprising that some of the same authors (like Innocent Gentillet) who accused Machiavelli of transforming all princes into oppressors also accused him of having indiscriminately praised the fighting over the tribuneship after the expulsion of Tarquin the Proud and the civil wars between Sulla and Marius and Caesar and Pompey.

One of the biggest obstacles to understanding Machiavelli's work seems to be the tendency to interpret the theses of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* as a simple reversal of the classical point of view. This hermeneutic strategy was adopted first by his detractors and only later, following the Radical Enlightenment and the French Revolution, by his admirers (who saw Machiavelli as a prophet). But in both cases it is incorrect. Despite the arguments of those who would like to make him into a forerunner of class struggle, Machiavelli does not claim that all tumult is good, nor does he defend all princes who resort to strong measures against the aristocracy in order to consolidate their own power and advance their reforms.[24] Indeed, it is very significant that, up until the French Revolution, this reading of Machiavelli's theory of conflict was often employed to discredit his work. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Gabriel Bonnot de Mably were the first to repropose it with a positive—and completely reversed—reading, claiming that the only alternative to despotism is civil strife and that without civil strife there is simply no liberty. Similarly, before the second half of the eighteenth century, any defense of the Greek tyrants and their violent populism that did not distinguish between the depraved Agathocles and the virtuous Hiero would have been unthinkable. From this perspective, anyone who attributes such a

[24] On the question of social conflicts, and the chronological distinction between a good and a bad phase, see G. Pedullà, *Machiavelli in tumulto. Conquista, cittadinanza e conflitto nei 'Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio'*, Rome, 2011, esp. pp. 104–12; English translation by P. Gaborik and R. Nybakken forthcoming as *Machiavelli in Tumult: The "Discourses on Livy" and the Origins of Political Conflictualism*, Cambridge, 2018.

position to Machiavelli is imposing a way of thinking on the sixteenth century that only came into existence on the eve of 1789.

No matter how much Machiavelli might be willing to reconsider certain historical figures, he remains firm on one point: a good ruler must devote himself to the common good (*bonum publicum*). In classical, medieval, and humanist traditions, this conduct alone draws an adequate dividing line between princes and tyrants, and Machiavelli, in this respect, is a fairly traditional thinker. In his writings, however, single actions are given less weight than they were in the legal tradition from Bartolus on. For instance, that a statesman betrays and violates his word in order to squash a political adversary means very little to Machiavelli. Had Greek philosophy not already taught that just actions are not always just? In his *De officiis* Cicero offered many examples of this, including the one in III.25.95:

> Again, if a man who has deposited money with you were to make war on your country, would you return the deposit? I believe not; for you would be acting contrary to the republic, which ought to be the dearest thing to you. In this way, many things that seem to be honourable by nature become honourable no longer through circumstance: to keep promises, to stand by agreements, and to return deposits become no longer honourable, if what is beneficial changes.[25]

Above all, Roman law allowed for princes to commit unjust actions in cases of extreme danger. In annotating the *Corpus Juris*, medieval theorists had recognized the existence of particular situations in which good rulers were permitted to violate the law. For that matter, even Bartolus concludes his *De tyranno* admitting that it is very difficult to find a ruler who does not possess at least some despotic trait, in line with an idea already found in Giles of Rome and that would be repeated at the end of the sixteenth century by Jean Bodin in *Six livres de la République*, II.4. As Bartolus admits, any prince completely devoid of any tyrannical quality should be known rather as a demigod (*semideus*). To use the exact words of Giles in *De regimine principum*, III.2.11:

> Perhaps no one is a tyrant in every respect, because evil destroys itself… Perhaps there are no kings who do not commit some tyrannical acts; if they were not tyrannical in anything they would be demigods. So it happens that those who command resort in part to the precautions of a king and in part to the deceptions of a tyrant.

[25] Cicero, *De officiis*, eds and transls M. T. Griffin and E. M. Atkins, Cambridge/New York, 1991, p. 137.

Moreover, we have already seen how Bartolus amends, to a degree, the rigidity of his decalogue through the notion of just cause, which creates a small breach in the fixed axiomatics of *De tyranno*. Machiavelli, however, goes further still: in his text the exception becomes less exceptional. In certain situations, even the best princes have to obey the bitter rules of power so as not to pay for their inability to adapt to unusual circumstances with a harsh defeat.

Using a metaphor from linguistics, we could say that Machiavelli shifts from a merely 'semantic' to a 'syntactic' conception of politics, in which every choice is part of a whole, and should always be contextualized within a broader system of forces and counterforces before any judgment: just like a single word in a sentence. What counts, *The Prince* cautions, is the comprehensive significance of a behavior more than the isolated action.

Of course, this is a general principle. Yet it is significant that, after calling into question the suppositions of the probative system in *De tyranno*, Machiavelli himself turns to a concrete example. Throughout his treatise he only takes an explicit position on five of the ten actions that according to Bartolus qualify a ruler as a despot, and in four of these five cases he unequivocally condemns the behavior. It should come as no surprise that the only exception regards the necessity to resort to strong medicine (*austeriores medicinae*) against one's potential enemies after gaining power: that is, in the case of Lorenzo and Florence, against the aristocrats (Chapter IX). Notwithstanding Machiavelli's distinction between 'severities properly used' and 'severities improperly used' (the latter being those that are repeated over time), the legal criteria of his age would have dictated that even one such action would have been enough instantly to situate Lorenzo among the tyrants *ex parte exercitii*, but *The Prince* claims that Lorenzo would err if he failed to choose such strong remedies. In particular, according to Machiavelli, suppressing the opponents of his new, much-longed-for militia, for example, was of crucial importance in the autumn of 1513.[26]

It is not surprising, then, that in the *Discourses*, where Machiavelli is less concerned with persuading Lorenzo to strike the aristocracy, the traditional concept of tyranny is used again in passages like this:

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[26] During the years of the republic, one of the principle accusations of the aristocrats toward Piero Soderini was that he wanted to make himself despot of the city, and that he even saw a path to get there in Machiavelli's militia project (thanks to R. Black, 'Machiavelli and the Militia: New Thoughts', *Italian Studies*, 69:1, 2014, pp. 41–50, we now know that Soderini was perfectly aware of the power of the 'ordinanza' as an instrument of political pressure). But the accusation could be reversed, and in the *Discourses* the Florentine aristocrats (specifically the Medici) are implicitly accused of favoring tyranny; see J. Najemy, '"Occupare la tirannide": Machiavelli, the Militia, and Guicciardini's Accusation of Tyranny', in *Della tirannia*, pp. 75–108.

> And no one will ever be so crazy or so wise, so wicked or so good, who will not praise what is to be praised and blame what is to be blamed, when the choice between the two qualities of me is placed before him. Nonetheless, afterward, deceived by a false good and a false glory, almost all let themselves go, either voluntarily or ignorantly, into the ranks of those who deserve more blame than praise; and though, to their perpetual honor, they are able to make a republic or a kingdom, they turn to tyranny. Nor do they perceive how much fame, how much glory, how much honor, security, quiet, with satisfaction of mind, they flee from by this policy; and how much infamy, reproach, blame, danger, and disquiet they run into.[27]

As we have seen, *The Prince* does not erase the distinction between good and bad princes. Legitimizing the arts of the lion and the fox does not imply that all the vices traditionally associated with tyrants are to be rehabilitated. And Machiavelli returns repeatedly to this point, almost as though he wanted to clarify his position immediately (in Chapter XXI) so that there would be no ambiguity after his provocative initial argument in Chapters XV through XVIII—similarly to what he had done in Chapter VIII by citing the cases of Agathocles and Oliverotto.

Beginning with Plato, tyranny had always represented something more than just a simple corrupt form of government. Classical and Renaissance authors agreed on this point: a tyrant is marked more by a psychological and moral abnormality than by a political one. A tyrant does not know how to control himself. He lives in prey to his passions, a slave to his desires. He does not possess the same rational control of his appetites that is required of adult men. And if he protects his own interests over the well-being of the citizenry, it is a result of this initial, innate intemperance that contorts all of his actions. By contrast, with the exception of the skills connected to the bottom half of his centaur nature (violence and deception), Machiavelli's good prince also possesses all of the characteristics that tradition dictates: 'great undertakings and showing himself to be extraordinary'; 'showing himself to be extraordinary in dealing with internal affairs'; 'striving in all of his actions to achieve the reputation of a great man of outstanding intelligence'; being 'a true friend and a true enemy'; 'demonstrating that he is a lover of the virtues'; 'encouraging his subjects to pursue their trades in tranquility'; 'establishing rewards . . . for anyone who seeks in any way to enrich his city or state'; 'keeping the populace occupied with festivals and spectacles'; taking account of the 'guilds and neighbourhoods that each city is divided into'; and 'offering himself as an example of humanity and munificence (Chapter XXI)'.[28]

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[27] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, transls H. C. Mansfield and N. Tarcov, Chicago, 1996, p. 31.

[28] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, pp. 76–9 (with minor adaptations).

Machiavelli is firm on two points in particular: the model prince pursues the common good (not his private interests) and avoids vulgar vices, which, in addition to fostering hatred against him, can make him despised and deprive him of the majesty (*maiestas*) needed to rule the city. So, if we examine the text case by case we observe once again that the novelty of Machiavelli is not to have erased the distinction between prince and tyrant but rather to have redrawn the boundaries between the two. With the exception of lavish spending (*liberalitas*), mercy (*clementia*), and good faith (*fides*)—which it might be necessary to avoid, at least in certain situations—all of the other traditional virtues are therefore approved by Machiavelli and prescribed to his 'new prince'.

The risks of being misunderstood were clear. And despite Machiavelli's repeated attempts to prevent any hasty judgment, many misunderstood him. Evidently, no explanation, addendum, or supplementary example was enough to stave off the scandal surrounding *The Prince* and the *Discourses*.[29] As I have already noted, the contemporaries who censured Machiavelli's work were not ignorant. On the contrary, they knew that his argument created at least as many problems as it resolved. Independently of his intentions, by questioning the possibility of unambiguous legal criteria for judging rulers, Machiavelli provided unprincipled men with dangerous conceptual instruments: tools that could be used from then on to justify the most unrighteous of actions, thwarting the work carried out by generations of jurists invested in holding princes legally responsible for their behavior.

This immediately became more difficult for those wishing to oppose the actions of tyrants. Tyrants could now wash their hands of any crime by citing the impelling constraints of politics, the precedents and the noble objectives of their actions. Following Machiavelli's critique, the legal system suddenly found itself disarmed. This is also the reason that Nifo went as far as to compare Machiavelli to those jurists who were paid by sovereigns to supply the pretext necessary to justify their political aims. In 1526 the philosopher would write another treatise in which he offers a reading of Machiavelli, blaming the recent Italian crisis on those men of the law who agreed to corrupt the same law to the benefit of their patrons.[30] From the rest of Nifo's writings we come to understand that for him Machiavelli embodied one particularly immoral exponent of this dangerous breed.

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[29] A large part of the entry 'Machiavel' in Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 2nd exp. ed., vol. 2, Rotterdam, 1702, pp. 1958–63, is dedicated to combating the false accusation that Machiavelli was a supporter of tyranny. Bayle, however, argues that Machiavelli's ideas can be found in Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Bartolus, and as such are not so scandalous. He overlooks the fact that in these cases the authors associated the ideas with tyrants alone, and not with the good prince as well.

[30] Cf. *De rege et tyranno*, Naples, 1526, II.5: 'Per causidicos mundus fere totus in tyrannidem versus sit' [Because of the *causidici* almost the whole world had fallen to tyranny].

How, then, should we interpret the disappearance of the tyrant? Since Machiavelli never maintained that the ends (understood as the result) justify the means, it is an error to imagine he believed that yesterday's and today's actions could be excused by an advantageous tomorrow. Rather, Machiavelli showed that he understood that the various tesserae come together to form a complete figure only at the end—an awareness that is even more striking if we admit that politics involves making day-to-day decisions in a context in which the final role of each political player is often unclear. This is all the more so as Truth, the daughter of Time, risks arriving too late to be useful in these situations.

Stressing the impossibility of relying on an external, unalterable system of signs, Machiavelli is forced to recognize the nonexistence of a guiding compass. For this reason, one of his characteristic themes will be the politicians' difficulty in judging correctly their tendency to let themselves be led by appearances. As we read in Chapter XVIII of *The Prince*: 'Men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands.'[31] Machiavelli's new system avoids the errors of Bartolus', but it makes the process of interpretation more subtle and difficult: so much so that what we gain in terms of understanding, we lose in terms of immediate practical efficacy—unless this ambiguity is counterbalanced by a resolute bet on the future, like the one that *The Prince* proposes to Lorenzo in Chapter XXVI.

The differences remain in place, but they are now more difficult to grasp. A politics of the gray zone begins with Machiavelli, one in which the true identity of the good prince and the bad prince is known to only a handful of experienced men capable of going beyond appearances. But even these experienced men will be continually forced to ask themselves on which side the political rulers belong. Do they protect their own interests alone? When they claim that an action is a necessity, is this merely an alibi? Or are they really fighting for their sake of their citizenry when they commit actions that we would otherwise consider repugnant?

Political modernity—if this term still carries meaning today—coincides with this condition of radical uncertainty. Indeed, when a great reformer and a bloodthirsty despot follow the same rules of worldly shrewdness, making them indistinguishable and leaving us wondering what lies behind the mask, we are forced to recognize that we are the children of Machiavelli: forced, like him, to depend on insubstantial clues that speak to us of a future that may never arrive.

[31] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 62.